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RECONCILING LEARNING, HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Building on a broad concept of workplace well-being, this paper suggests a cohesive framework for the research and practice of workplace learning and development of human resources and proposes that synergies between these fields should be better acknowledged. There are three major concerns behind the proposition: a taken-for-granted approach to adult learning, the fragmented state of research and theory on workplace learning and development of human resources, and the current relationship between research, policy and practice in these fields. The paper is structured into three parts. The first part describes the proposed integrative framework. The discussion in the second and third parts builds argumentation for a need for a more holistic thinking about learning and working life development. The second part presents three existing lines of theorising on learning and various developments in the workplace, and exemplifies how the mainstream studies have built on only two of these. The third part describes the third, *holistic* approach, and critically discusses the promise and prospects of this line of theorising. Here the paper draws also from the critical discussion emerging particularly from within the literature on human resource development (HRD). One of the main conclusions of the paper are that methodology seems to determine the development of theory, rather than the other way around. Related to this, the efforts to promote multidisciplinary research have so far not produced results in line with expectations. Another conclusion is that academia itself, with its structures, policies and traditions contribute to an increasingly fragmented picture of 'reality' in regards to the topic in question, and forms a major obstacle in developing more coherent thinking, transparency and open communication across the fields of studies and disciplines.

Purpose

This paper aims to promote the 'big picture' of learning and development in workplaces. My purpose is twofold. Firstly, building on a concept of workplace well-being, I shall propose an integrated, 'holistic' framework for the research on, and practice of, learning and the development of human resources. The model draws from and expands some existing work in this line. Through well-being this paper also seeks links between workplace learning (WPL) and human resources development (HRD) and the area traditionally covered under health, safety and environment, and further to human resource management (HRM) policies and practice. The first part of this paper describes the model.

Secondly, the paper aims to contribute to the conceptual-theoretical discussion on learning related to work and HRD in work organisations. A further concern here is the development of mainstream research and theorising within WPL and HRD towards increasing fragmentation and specialisation vs. a need and initiatives emerging from practice and policy towards more integrated and cohesive developmental approaches. The notion 'nothing is as practical as good theory' (Heckscher, quoted in Carlson, 1983, p. 60) captures this concern well. An ideal, a proactive match between theory/research and practice/policy, would mean that theoretical development within WPL and HRD could be assessed from the point of view of how realistically it reflects these activities in workplaces, on the one hand, and how it succeeds in lending itself for the service (explaining) and advancement of workplace practices and policy making, on the other hand. At the moment there seems to be a 'tragic absence of a common language' (Agoshgova, 1998), both within the fragmented theorising and research in these fields and regarding their relationship with policy and practice. The discussion in the second and third parts of this paper builds argumentation for a need for a more holistic thinking about learning and working life development, but also poses a question to the prospects of holistic alternatives. The main developments taking place in the mainstream theorising on WPL and HRD are reviewed, together with critiques posed towards them – mainly from 'within'. Some comments will also be made about how academia functions and how its policies and traditions contribute to the picture of 'reality' in regards to the topic in question.

Reconciling WPL, HRD and workplace well-being

Vaill (1989) reminds us how reductionist approaches tend to forget that action taking is a 'process performed by a whole person, in relation to a whole environment populated by other whole persons' (pp. 114-115, quoted in Desimone *et al.*, 2002, p. 521). While quite a lot of attention has been paid to the context in which learning and development take place, the inherent qualities of the actors, the worker-learners, and their impact on the work performance, have been less discussed. Even most of the constructivist approaches acknowledging human agency seem not to have extended their focus much beyond the cognitive issues. In regards to learning among children and young people there is a shared understanding that we cannot really expect a child to be able to concentrate on learning and make good results unless she or he has it 'well' otherwise, physically, socially and emotionally. When it comes to various conditions for learning, the current discourse on adult learning seems overly optimistic, forgetting that adults too always function as 'wholes'. Much about 'adulthood' has been taken for granted. This part describes the concepts of WPL, HRD and well-being, and their interrelationships, as they are understood here. The presentation closes by a proposal for an integrative framework, a bigger picture for scrutinising workplace learning (WPL) and human resources development (HRD).

The relationship between WPL and HRD

The conceptualisation adopted here does not draw a strong distinction between WPL and HRD, nor does it make the traditional individual-organisation divide when discussing learning in the context of the workplace. This kind of an integrated line of thinking can also be found in existing literature (Garavan *et al.*, 2002). Learning is viewed at the core of HRD – and, optimally, of any other work-related activity. The rationale here is that any learning occurring in the workplace within the joint object of the particular work (Engeström, 2003), is considered development of HR. Likewise, activities undertaken to promote any aspect of HRD have the potential to enhance, but do not necessarily lead to, learning in the workplace.

When it comes to learning, I have limited the discussion to human resource development within its current discourses in research, policy and practice. A further limitation is that not all learning at work (for example, some forms of social learning) is to be viewed as developmental in a progressive sense. Inarguably, learning leads to change, but the value of the outcome is to be assessed relative to the state preceding the change.

Generally speaking, the approaches to WPL and HRD share the focus on learning and the context of the workplace. Their main difference is that WPL tends to be more concerned with learning processes and less on the broader context and dynamics of the workplace, while HRD emphasises interventions and organisational factors at the expense of actual learning processes. However, some schools of thought, notably those building on the socio-cultural and cultural-historical tradition, show more concern for the context and collective in regards WPL. Mainstream approaches to HRD take the organisation and the match between the employee and work/context as a starting point. Success in HRD-activities is judged relative to their contribution to the organisation's overarching purpose, to their instrumental value (Kuchinke, 1998). Outcomes can be measured in actions and their results (performance). Success in WPL is both more elusive and extensive, building on a new and/or accumulating understanding or skills. Learning, however, is also considered a value in itself, hence difficult to measure. In the context of workplace, outcomes of learning, job competence (Tikkanen, 2002), leads further to mastering one's job. Besides being very 'real', job competence is also a sort of an abstraction, hard to grasp. It follows that it can only be measured as it becomes manifested in use (job tasks) and as relative to a particular (work) context (Ellström, 1996). Thus, the outcomes of both WPL and HRD become manifested in how a person manages his or her job in his or her particular workplace.

Well-being

It is argued that no other arena in a modern society is of such a basic importance to the development of well-being than working life (von Otter, 2003). When discussing the flow-experience, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) makes the following notions about 'the paradox of work':

Work is a strange experience: it provides some of the most intense and satisfying moments, it gives a sense of pride and identity, yet it is something most of us are glad to avoid. ... Because work is so important in terms of the amount of time it takes and the intensity of effects it produces in consciousness, it is essential to face up to its ambiguities if one wishes to improve the quality of life. (pp. 46-47)

'Well-being' is a concept that has recently emerged on the side of the more medically oriented discussion about occupational 'health', particularly in the Nordic countries but also more broadly in Europe as the last conference (November 2003) of the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology showed.

Drawing from the changes taking place in work and workplaces the new conceptualising on well-being for research and practice has particularly been developed in the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOCH). FIOCH's holistic approach takes 'work ability' (Ilmarinen, 1999) as its starting point. It involves both individual aspects of well-being, such as job-competence, health, job tasks and so on, and concerns for work, work environment, work organisations and management. Job competence and its development through learning are considered an essential part of the maintenance of the employees' work ability (Launis, 2001, p. 33). HRD is viewed as a multidisciplinary activity, undertaken in co-operation with the planning and development of other central organisational activities. Furthermore, the focus has shifted from individuals to organisations. Thus, organisational learning and learning organisations, sharing of knowledge and collaborative learning, are at the core of the concern instead of individual learning (Launis, 2001).

Towards an integrated understanding

A holistic framework to WPL and HRD should advance our understanding of overall workplace well-being. The framework proposed here (Figure 1), draws from the above definitions and FIOCH's approach to 'work ability'. Theoretically the model builds broadly on systems theory and activity theory (discussed later in this paper). The key message of the model is in efforts to understand and develop of any work-related activities among the personnel, it is necessary to acknowledge all the four aspects – job competence, health, job tasks and demands, and the work environment – and their interplay.

Human performance is an intricate interplay of the mind, body and action (here) in the context of work. Learning and development are located at the heart of the individual and collective performance in the workplace or 'workspace', whether physical or virtual by nature. The needs for, and results from, learning are not only relevant to the development of job competence, but to all the four dimensions. Consequently, learning is essential to interventions targeted at improving human resources. Learning stands as much for tolerance to and management of change – individual or organisational – as for a core to innovation.

The four-dimensional framework shown in Figure 1 can be applied to well-being in other life spheres outside work, too. It can be pictured three-dimensionally on a private-public continuum where work

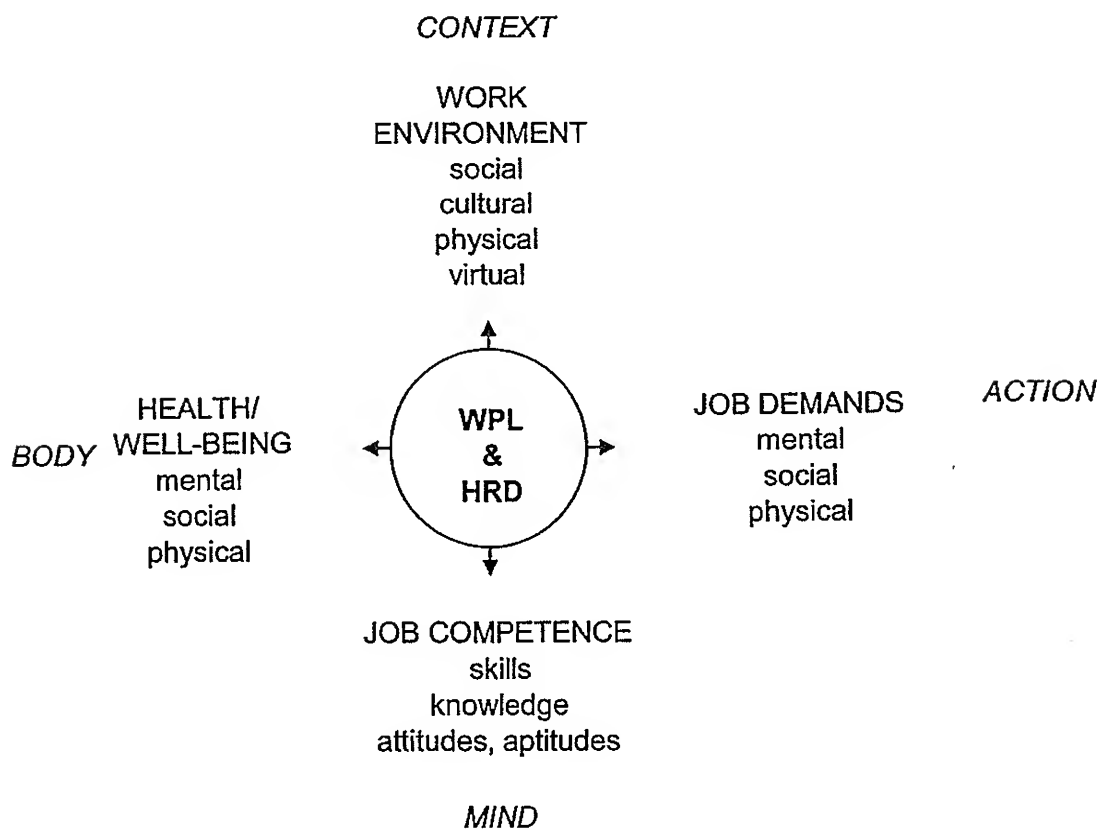


Figure 1. A framework integrating WPL and HRD with dimensions of workplace well-being.

typically would locate somewhere in between. Learning and development would still remain at the core, although the intervention-aspect might vary.

HRM, which traditionally has involved the broadest responsibility for the multitude of issues covered by the model shown in Figure 1, has been fragmented in organisational everyday practice and the parts delegated to separate sub-regimes (for example, HRD and workplace health and safety). The model in Figure 1 suggests the challenge is to think of the fragments as a whole again, and develop individual action and organisational praxis from that basis. This may sound like turning back the hand of time, after all, the roots for HRM are in 'industrial welfare' and general 'caring' for workers (Bratton, 1999). However, concern for learning and development advances the concept of well-being from those days.

If we look at research in the area of WPL and HRD, we find out that, until today, the connections between well-being, or any health-related aspects, and learning and performance in workplaces have aroused the interest among researchers only minimally (Russ-Eft, 2001). Regardless of the visibility of stress in workplaces, researchers within HRD have not taken grip on it, which Russ-Eft (2001) considers 'unfortunate' in her editorial to one of the leading journals in the field, *HRD Quarterly*.

One of the rare studies (Bjorquist and Lewis, 1994) in this area focused on workers' perspective in HRD and included health and well-being on workers' agenda when considering the results from training. The findings suggested that a holistic approach to individuals helps to avoid wrong causal interpretations about the effects of training. While the health-productivity relationship is generally undisputed, only recently have studies started to seek for, and found, evidence for the importance of well-being to workplace learning and productivity (Lee *et al.*, 2002; Martin and Westerhof, 2003).

A recent study focused on connections between well-being and intellectual capital (Hussi, 2003) and was built on FIOCH's model of work ability. It showed that the most essential change caused by intellectual capital has taken place in relation to competence, because the focus is shifting from individual's competencies to collective competence. Changes in work environment, workplace community and employee's health were shown to be

underlying processes behind this development. Employees' well-being was the prerequisite for successful knowledge creation.

A closely corresponding conceptualisation to the framework shown in Figure 1 was used in a developmental work research project on competence development and overall well-being among ageing (40+) workers in SMEs at the end of 1990s (Parkatti *et al.*, 2000; Parkatti *et al.*, 2002). The results provided evidence for synergy effects from various approaches to learning, health and human resources development in workplaces. This broad-based and long-term project was able to enhance competence development and well-being on individual and organisational levels, even among employees that are traditionally considered problematic in regards learning and developmental interventions (older, low-educated).

Abundance of theories, little unanimity

One of the great paradoxes of our time is that at the same time as theory has failed in what it was meant to provide us, telling The Truth, there have never been as many theories influencing our everyday lives as there are today. (Gustavsen, 1996)

The literature on WPL and HRD is substantial and fast growing. Data has been produced actively and theories and models are to be found in abundance. As is common in new fields of study, less time is spent by scholars to profoundly analyse, synthesise and integrate concepts and findings. Reflection upon the bigger picture becomes easily secondary, at best.

Seeking independence from the broader field of HRM, the practice of HRD has become firmly established, increasingly so also the academic subject (Kuchinke, 1999). In terms of research and theory development, however, the field is still seeking identity. A range of theories is used to provide modes of explanation in HRD, but a commonly shared view is lacking. This situation is quite similar within WPL. WPL has rapidly developed as a specific area of study within adult education. For example, in Finland it has been dominating the research in, and practice of, adult education for about a decade. However, in Finland the situation between WPL and HRD is

blended, as a majority of professionals within HRD get their training within adult education rather than in business schools.

To get a complete picture over theorising within workplace learning and development of human resources, it would be necessary to examine the research literature from various disciplinary backgrounds and various levels, which the variety of existing theories and models covers. Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I shall take a look at some major characteristics of these theorising.

An analyse by Kuchinke (1999) of the philosophical, theoretical and political assumptions underlying the concept of adult development within HRD resulted in defining three major schools of thought: person-centred, focusing on innate, latent patterns and potential; production-centred stressing individual adjustment on external demands; and 'principled problem solving' focusing on situation and its functional optimisation. These dimensions were reflected in the characterisation presented by Swanson (2001) when analysing the different disciplinary backgrounds of HRD. Swanson defines the core of HRD theories as a 'three-legged-stool', formed by three core/foundations: psychological, economic and systems theory. As a field of inquiry, also workplace learning is highly inter-disciplinary (Bratton *et al.*, 2001). There is an intense search for new research approaches and theories, crossing boundaries between economics, organisational theory, sociology, cognitive science, psychology and anthropology (Engeström, 1996b). Further contributions from the applied fields of studies of adult education and communication sciences are covered by these, albeit standing as independent fields of study.

Analysing theories of learning at work, Garrick (2000) has identified four most influential current discourses: human capital theory, experience-based learning, cognition and expertise at work, and generic skills, capabilities and competence. These discourses reflect the above mentioned three major lines of theorising in HRD and can be located under them; psychology (cognition and expertise at work), economy (human capital, capabilities and competence), and more holistic, systemic approach (experience-based learning, generic skills). Taking the theories of adult learning as a starting point, Bratton *et al.* (2001) focus on the level of organisation and separate

three bodies of literature on workplace learning: (i) 'the orthodox view based on behavioural principles' (learning as 'engineered' and with a significant influence on organisational performance), (ii) WPL as a metaphor to characterise a work organisation (learning as a variant of culture), and (iii) a critical perspective (learning as a part of company strategy). Also this characterisation bears some resemblance to the triad of approaches described above. The third dimension or approach in these characterisations are most similar in that they present a kind of a critical alternative to the more mainstream approaches, which the two first lines of thoughts largely represent.

The above characterisation shows the triadic 'grand theory' of HRD and WPL and the various disciplinary influences to their development. If we move our analysis on towards workplace practice and study the influence of the grand theories, we find out that the two major traditional approaches within HRD are the performance and learning 'paradigms' (Barrie and Pace, 1998). The former focuses on employee performance and productivity and the latter on learning and competence development among the staff. A major philosophical debate has been going on around the question whether HRD should focus on promoting one or the other of these two (Garavan *et al.*, 2000). Besides different disciplinary influences, Garavan and others (2000) have suggested the divide has been brought about by the different focus among practitioners (performance) and academics (learning). In the latter area in particular, the conceptualisation and discussion are highly overlapping with that on WPL within adult education. Another line of conceptualisation merging this area is the 'soft' version of the human resource management (Bratton, 1999). It emphasises learning and advocates investment in training and development, as well as the adoption of strategies, which will ensure a competitive advantage to companies through highly skilled and loyal employees (Bratton, 1999).

On the side of the traditional dualistic view, more recent literature on HRD shows how the third grand theory or paradigm is gaining power. Common to the emerging views are the search for integrated, more coherent, inclusive and comprehensive theoretical explanations aiming to reconcile the existing dual-thinking (Garavan *et al.*, 2000; Kuchinke, 1998; Swanson, 2001). Kuchinke (1998) bases his arguments for a need for a new approach in HRD

on the rapidly changing organisations and the new economic reality. In his view, essential for the new approach is a clear focus on learning and broadening the definition of 'performance' to include building of broad human, social and intellectual capital. Also the DeSeCo project by OECD (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations, 2003) recently presented a broad definition of competence, building on a holistic approach. The authors describe the new approach as follows:

The underlying model is holistic and dynamic in that it combines complex demands, psychosocial prerequisites (including cognitive, motivational, ethical, volitional, and social components), and context into a complex system that makes competent performance or effective action possible. Thus competencies do not exist independently of action and context. (Rychen and Salganic, 2003, pp. 46-47)

In sum, this part has shown how there are three main theoretical and disciplinary influences on developing human resources in the workplaces, but also how in practice, by and large, only two of these have been used. Critiques of these two and their 'narrow-minded' rationale are emerging, along with calls for broader conceptualising. The next part will take a closer look at the critiques and their grounds.

Emerging dissatisfaction and critique challenging for new thinking

The recent research literature, particularly within HRD, suggests that the trend towards fragmented conceptualising and model building is becoming undesirable and reducing the complexity is being called for. The critique is growing from within. McGoldrick *et al.* (2001) describe the process of defining HRD as 'proving to be frustrating, elusive and confusing', suggesting the field is lacking a distinctive theoretical or conceptual identity. Swanson (2001) claims that 'HRD is presently full of atheoretical models (not theories) and espoused theories that are unsubstantiated' (p. 309), while McGoldrick and others (2001) describe the language used 'jargon-ridden' and 'meaning-hidden'. Further, Short *et al.* (2003) claim that the field is fad driven and reactive, and characterise its current state as a 'paradox', pointing criticism to the lack of firm practice-theory connection, among other things.

Not surprisingly then, one of the major current trends in the HRD literature is a search to clarify and analyse its theoretical and philosophical basis (Garavan *et al.*, 2002; Garrick, 2000). Overviews of theory building have been recently provided by many scholars, like Swanson (2001), Barrier and Pace (1998), Garavan and others (2002), Kuchinke (1999), and McGoldrick and others (2001). Swanson (2001) suggests this trend indicates that HRD has reached a maturation point, which calls for putting theory building in the forefront in this traditionally practice-dominated field, in his opinion, too important to “wallow” in atheoretical explanations. His goal, like that of other scholars (Garavan *et al.*, 2000; McGoldrick *et al.*, 2001), is to help HRD to develop to a discipline of its own, independent of its host disciplines.

In adult education the literature on WPL shows less concern for a need to seek for conceptual-theoretical clarity within the field. Efforts have been made, but typically within each major discourse (see Garrick, 2000) rather than across them. Some exceptions can be found, however. Fenwick (2000), for example, explored to expand conceptions of experiential learning to contemporary perspectives on cognition. When it comes to communication across the fields of WPL and HRD, the search for broader understanding seems to freeze, unfortunately. Recent literature shows that, conceptually, scholars within HRD seem to find it easier to include WPL in their thinking, while those representing WPL seem less active and less ‘naturally’ to merge with HRD.

From the point of view of social sciences the situation resembles that referred to by Merton more than 30 years ago (1968). He argued that efforts to develop an integrated understanding on any particular issue within social sciences typically tend to take place within one discipline rather than several, and deal with a fragmented state of research and middle-range theories. Have we made much progress within more than three decades?

The fragmentation is viewed as undesirable by many scholars, while others argue that the plurality of views should be seen as a strength and that the many different perspectives, in fact, cannot be integrated, because they are distinct and incompatible (Stacey, 2001). Still there are others who argue that the fragmentation is ‘natural’, as it only reflects the reality, the state of the art in the field in practice. The undesirability notion, however, is hard to avoid,

when we take into account that it is not only ideas that are not cross-communicating, but also, and in essence, people, scholars, who *choose* not to cross-communicate. The two camps, WPL within (adult) education and HRD within economics and management sciences, maintain their distinction by using different media for publishing, partly historically separately developed, and by the practice of separate scientific meetings and conferences. This, however, does not mean that there would be no flow of communication across these fields. Some researchers use both of these fields and arenas they provide to disseminate or communicate their research and ideas, happily ignorant of the basic divide.

Similarly, both fields are used by practitioners who wish to learn more for their work. It is academia, which is labelled by tension between rhetoric and practice and where the debates taking place on 'turf' (Swanson, 2001) seem very hard to overcome. These 'academic tribes', defined by Tight (2000) as adult/continuing/lifelong education, organisational behaviour/occupational psychology and management development/learning/studies, are all engaged in the exploration of the relationship between organisations and learning, but with only limited contacts with each other. Clearly, the notion put forward by Swanson (2001) that academic turf issues confuse the theoretical discussion *within* HRD, is true also across closely related disciplines. Inarguably, methodological issues have a lot to do with both the fragmentation and the reluctance among scholars to cross-disciplinary communication. What makes this state of affairs particularly interesting within these two fields of study is that both are famous for advancing progressive notions, such as 'open communication', 'transparency' and 'boundary crossing'.

While politics in academia may be an issue *per se*, theoretically it is difficult to find sustainable arguments pro the discipline of HRD on its own, separate from WPL (adult education). Rather, in the light of what has been presented above, the contrary sounds more preferable. In particular so, if the third line of theorising presented above continues to gain footing. Credibility of one of the main tasks of researchers, building on (accumulating or testing) existing knowledge base, already is an issue. A study on the existing literature shows that researchers are busier in getting their own word out, in publishing, than taking time to study the work of others and how their own work might relate to that. Understandably, a deep concern for the future of HRD was very

recently expressed 'from within'. Short *et al.* (2003) claimed that failing to acknowledge the 'challenges will increasingly marginalize HRD within organizations', so that the worst scenario could be being 'left on the sidelines: a gradually shrinking number of people who write for themselves, focus on internal process issues, and react ineffectively to demands long after they have been formulated' (p. 242). The situation is a very unfortunate, as the concern for the 'workforce', for the 'employees', for the people factor, is clearly increasing in the general discussion about work and working life.

Holistic thinking – a probable alternative?

Currently many organisations attempt to adopt a holistic view to workplace learning (Gold, 1999). Referring to the situation in studies on work, Engeström (2003) suggests that also studies on organisational and workplace learning should be reintegrated into a coherent science to better match the changed, 'post-bureaucratic' nature of work. A trend towards 'wholes' and more comprehensive approaches concerning *human* issues in organisations is emerging also in other related areas (see, for example, Cressney and Kelleher, 2000; Doyle, 2000; Patton, 2000).

Approaches that promote more comprehensive understanding and holistic theorising draw from systems thinking (Senge, 1994), activity theory (Engeström, 1996b) or organic models (for example, Beckett, 2000; Beckett and Hager, 2000). Their aim is to avoid the pitfalls of reductionist approaches. Literature on workplace learning and developing human resources in organisations provides several examples of holistic thinking or suggestions to develop our understanding in that direction, in theory and in organisational practice. I have illustrated several of them in an earlier paper on the topic (Tikkanen, forthcoming).

The examples showed how "holism" is a vague label attached to a range of various views, models and approaches, none of which are completely critique-free. "Wholeness" is inseparably connected with the notion of 'system', which, in turn, seeks to 'find an explanation of the emergence of integral properties of the whole through properties and relations of elements' (Agoshgova, 1998). The problem is, however, that although fundamental for the essence of systems research, the object reflected by the system in the real

world possesses an infinite complexity and an infinite diversity of their properties (Agoshgova, 1998). Thus, systems paradigm in knowledge, 'one of the most important achievements of human thought of the 21st century' (Agoshgova, 1998), also has its challenge in a group of different schools, in need for harmony to overcome contradictions between them and to unify them into a single systems conception.

Regardless of the challenges in conceptualisations promoting holistic thinking on learning and development in the workplace, they convey a message. The most important one is perhaps hope, underlining that we should always strive towards a coherent understanding of human life and activity, in any context, and to avoid overly fragmented views and explanations. The latter by no means suggests rejecting plurality. What it urges to avoid is, in essence, producing new models and approaches for their own sake, without thorough thinking and linking where they come from and where they might take us, relative to where we are and what we already know.

There are various challenges, if not problems, however, on the way to develop truly innovative thinking within social sciences in general. As things stand today, most researchers are too occupied with their own knowledge production. Time seems all too scarce for contemplation. Time as such, however, is not the problem, but rather academia and the existing systems and practices for knowledge creation. Furthermore, and as importantly, methodological challenges are vast in building research on more comprehensive, holistic approaches. When it comes to the field of study discussed in this paper, the situation is very similar to the one in mainstream developmental psychology described by Jaan Valsiner in the 1990s: methodology dominates over theoretical development.

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